

The Kareneth transport flew across the fields, leaving a shadow over the people below, who waved up to the transport carrying their Princess to Vadora for her wedding. Children raced after it, wishing they could see the Princess in her wedding gown—wishing they could see the Princess at all, for none of them ever had. Or if they had, they did not know it was her. Only those in the castle had ever seen her, and they had been sworn to secrecy under pain of death.

While the Emperor and Empress loved their daughter, they were afraid of what the world might think of her condition.

“We’ll be approaching the Vadoran Wall in half an hour, Sir,” the pilot told the Lord Chamberlain, who was the envoy sent to perform the ceremony and start the peace process. A traditional Kareneth wedding would be performed by him, then a Vadoran wedding would be performed in three months when the treaty was signed.

“Thank you,” the Lord Chamberlain told him. “Stay on the course the Vadorans gave us. Don’t deviate.”

The Lord Chamberlain left and went to the back where Princess Yumisa and her handmaidens were getting ready. He knocked on the door to the room they were changing in, away from the soldiers sent to protect them. Ado Murano opened the door a crack and looked outside.

“We’ll reach the Wall in half an hour,” he told her.

“We’ll be ready by then,” she told him. “Thank you. Do you understand the instructions Empress Wakuni gave you?”

“I do,” he answered. “Seems a strange way to meet a future husband, though.”

“Our job is to first and foremost protect Princess Yumisa,” she said. “This is how we have decided to do it. Just do your part.”

“I will. How is the Princess doing? Is she nervous?”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Ado asked. “But she seems okay, other than a noise bothering her hearing. She thinks one of the engines might need to be looked at.”

“The engines are fine—maintenance would not have sent it out if something was wrong. What kind of noise could be bothering her?”

“I don’t know, but her ears are going wild.”

“Strange.” The Lord Chancellor pressed his lips together thoughtfully. “I hope this isn’t some kind of attack. The Princess can hear high-pitched noises we cannot, yes?” he asked.

“Yes, she can,” Ado said, wondering what he was getting at.

“But how could the Vadorans know that?” he wondered. He shook his head and waved the notion off. “No, they couldn’t. Forget I mentioned anything. I’m just being paranoid. Please do what you can to protect the Princess.”

“Always.” Ado closed the door again.

“Commander,” the Lord Chancellor said to the man in charge of the transport. “Can we see if there are any signals being sent toward us that might be affecting the Princess—something out of normal hearing range?”

“I’ll get right on it,” the Commander said. “Are you thinking we’re being attacked?”

“Not us, but perhaps the Princess—but I hope I’m wrong.”

“Your Highness, you have to control your ears,” Chiharu admonished her as she tried to fit the veil into Yumisa’s hair. “I can’t put this veil in place if they’re twitching like that!”

“Sorry, but I can’t exactly control them when someone is blowing a dog-whistle!” she said. “Are you sure the engines are okay, Ado? Because something seems out of place!”

“The Lord Chancellor said the transport would not have been sent out if there were any problems,” Ado told her as she tried to apply Yumisa’s makeup. That was difficult because the Princess’s face was scrunching up due to the noise rebounding through her skull. “My Lady, please stop doing that!”

“I can’t help it—do you think I have a choice?”

“Your makeup is difficult enough to apply when you’re not freaking out,” Ado said. “I don’t want to mess this up!”

“Try this.” Ruri Wakita placed a set of earbuds into Yumisa’s ears and cranked up the music of ZOO. Yumisa’s face instantly relaxed as the rock music seemed to at least mostly drown out the high-pitched whine she had been hearing.

“Good thinking,” Ado said as she began to work quickly, before Yumisa started to rock out to the music she was hearing. Of all their fans, Yumisa was the biggest.

“That makes me wonder what that girl, Shiori, thought of the presents we gave her,” Chiharu thought as she finished working on Yumisa’s hair and veil.

“If she is Prince Kiminobu’s guard, we should see her again soon,” Kohana said. “You can ask her.”

“This whole situation is strange,” Takē commented as she finished painting Yumisa’s nails. “I mean, our beloved Princess is getting married to an enemy Prince, and we’re leaving our home for another place that we’ve never been to. I hope the Vadorans are nice people.”

“We can handle them if they aren’t,” Chiharu told her. “But they’re probably just like us—stuck in the middle of a war they never wanted.”

“Except we are the aggressors,” Kohana said sadly. “They were just defending themselves.”

“Yeah, and my father didn’t exactly try to stop the conquest of the world his great-great-grandfather started,” Yumisa said.

“Your Highness... you heard us?” Chiharu asked, feeling her face drain of color.

She pointed to her ears.

“Forgive us, Your Highness—we meant no disrespect,” Kohana said.

“It’s all right,” Yumisa told her. “We are the bad guys in all this. I don’t expect to be welcomed warmly in Vadora. I just hope Prince Kiminobu and his family can forgive us.”

“I don’t think they’d accept peace if they weren’t going to,” Chiharu told her. She gave Yumisa a small hug.

“Hope for the best, expect the worst,” Yumisa told them. “Unfortunately, we have a worse enemy in the Unbound Uprising. If only we could get them to listen to your music, the world would be a much better place.”

“Your Highness, we just got word from the Wall that the Kareneth transport will be inside the Wall in ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Prince Kiminobu said.

“Everything all right, Your Highness?” the transport commander asked. “Or just pre-wedding jitters?”

“Just thinking,” Prince Kiminobu told him. “Lieutenant Seno has this idea that the Princess is a member of ZOO, and apparently my mother believes it as well

after reading a note ZOO gave Shiori with some gifts. They aren't telling me who they think it is, though."

"Hmm... a member of ZOO, they think?" The commander thought about that. "I doubt it would be the lead singer, Kitsune—that would be a little too obvious," he said. "Panda might be a good option—she can sing, plays a killer guitar, and she's not in the spotlight enough to be seen as competition for Kitsune but just enough that fans notice her. Tora... I think a princess might want a little more spotlight than she gets—especially a Princess no one has ever seen outside of Kareneth. Usagi..."

"You know ZOO?" Kiminobu asked.

"I'd better—my kids love them," he said. "If there's a chance this wedding means the band can play here, I'll never hear the end of it."

Kiminobu smiled. "They were good," he said. "Their sound was definitely unique. So, if you had to take a gut guess as to who it was, who would you choose?"

"Koara," he said. "You never notice her, but she's always there with her drums. ZOO wouldn't really exist without her. But I just have a thing for drummers, too."

Kiminobu laughed. "I'll keep that in mind," he said.

"May I ask why you're asking these questions? Wouldn't Princess Yumisa just introduce herself to you?"

"Put yourself in her family's position. You're coming to a land you've been at war with for two hundred years. You've been told only a transport ship and one mech are allowed inside the Wall. Wouldn't you try to protect the Princess' identity in case we tried to kidnap her? Or worse yet, the transport doesn't arrive and is captured by the Unbound Uprising?"

"Good points," the commander agreed. "So you think they're going to play a game with you."

"It's possible."

"And if they do?"

"Then I play. At least I've seen them—I can't really lose, unless I choose wrong and tick them off. Hmm..."

"Your Highness?"

Kiminobu smiled. “I’m an idiot,” he said. “I know who Yumisa is. And if I’m right... I might be the luckiest man alive.”

“How so?”

“Get me Lieutenant. Seno on a secure line,” Kiminobu said with a grin. He put on a pair of headphones with a mic.

The Atlas blared with the music of ZOO reverberating through the cockpit. Shiori Seno tapped her free foot to the beat as she flew in formation, though all she wanted to do was fly to the song playing. She knew Asa hated when she played her music while piloting, but as there was nothing to do and there was no battle, she figured Asa would not mind too much.

A light on her board flashed, and she groaned before turning the music off. “You’re on the air with Shiori, what can I play for you?” she asked lightheartedly.

“Hey, Shiori, I got a question for you.”

“What’s up, Your Highness?” she asked. “You got a question, I have an answer!”

“What do you know about ZOO’s manager?”

Shiori’s eyes went wide. “You know, I don’t know anything about her,” she said. “She kinda sticks to the background. In fact, last night was the first time I ever saw her. I did find it kinda odd that she dressed up like ZOO does, though. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you said you think the Princess might be a member of ZOO—but what if she was their manager?”

“Huh...” Shiori thought about that for a moment. “Well, that’s a distinct possibility. I can’t tell you, though. Maybe their manager just has an animal fetish, and that’s why she told the band to dress up. Anything is possible, though.”

“All right, if not the manager, who do you think the Princess might be?”

“I’d love for the Princess to be Kitsune, but if I had to guess... I’d say Koara—she’s never really in the spotlight, but she’s always there with her drums.”

“You and the transport commander think alike,” Kiminobu told her. “Thanks for your input.”

“Sure thing! The Love Doctor is always on!”

“This is Vadoran Wall Command to transport and escort,” a broadcast interrupted. “Our visitors have landed and are waiting.”

“Wall Command, this is transport—we see them. We will be landing shortly,” the transport Commander said.

“Roger that, transport. Looks like we might also have some unwanted wedding crashers. We’ll send some guards out to dissuade them. Still, I’d make this wedding quick.”

“Roger that, but the Wall and Shield will hold, no doubts.”

“Agreed.”

“Landing now,” Asa broadcast. “We still want some distance between them and us, just in case.”

“Acknowledge, Captain Ikehara. Wall out.”

“Why are they landing so far away?” Yumisa asked the Lord Chancellor. “It’s not like they don’t outgun us.” She winced and shook her head, wishing she could plug her ears again.

“We’re all being cautious, Your Highness,” he told her. “Just let them do what they feel is best.”

“Did you eat enough this morning, Chiharu?” Yumisa asked her. “I don’t want you passing out on us.”

“I’m fine, Your Highness,” Chiharu told her. “You’re the one I’m worried about. Can you still hear that sound?”

“It’s actually worse now,” Yumisa said. “It’s like the wall and shield are reflecting it back towards me from wherever it’s coming from! Ugh! It hurts!” She started to collapse, but Chiharu and Ruri caught her. “Thanks, Chiharu, Ruri,” she said.

“You might want to call us by our stage names if we’re going to play this game,” Ruri told her quietly.

“You’re right,” Yumisa said. “And I guess you’d better call me Okami—everyone else, too,” she said. “Including you, Lord Chancellor.”

“Yes, Okami,” he said.

“And lose the reverence for now.”

“I’ll do my best.”

They watched as the door to the transport opened and a man walked down the ramp and started towards them. The five Nexus suits landed, and he waited for their pilots to dismount. Four did while the pilot of the largest of the suits remained behind.

“Wow, they’re all *pretty*,” Yumisa growled softly. “I don’t see Shiori, though. I don’t recognize any of them.”

“No one is as beautiful as you,” Chiharu whispered. “Now be quiet. Lord Chancellor, you’re up.”

The Lord Chancellor stepped forward, aware of the eyes of everyone on him, and approached the Prince and his guards.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” he greeted. “I am Lord Chancellor to his Majesty, Emperor Sunada Hase. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Hello, Lord Chancellor—may I introduce Asa Ikehara, the Captain of my Royal Guard, and this is Rumiko, Mizuko, and Kii.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet all of you,” the Lord Chancellor said. “Your exploits as pilots are... legendary, and I do mean that as a begrudging compliment.” He laughed softly but they did not. He cleared his throat. “I apologize, but we were enemies not too long ago.”

“Can we get the ceremony over with?” Asa asked directly. “We have reports of an Uprising command carrier quickly approaching. The sooner we get the Prince and Princess back to the castle, the better I’ll feel.”

“Of course, but... there is a small issue.”

“What kind of *issue*?” Asa asked, narrowing her green eyes darkly. She knew, but she was still annoyed.

The Lord Chancellor indicated the six women, who were all dressed alike. They all wore kimono wedding dresses patterned to look like the skins of animals. All of them had their heads and faces covered. Looking at them, other than the color of their clothes and their heights, they looked alike.

“I have been authorized to tell you, Prince Kiminobu, why Princess Yumisa has never been seen and why her picture has never been taken. She was born with a recessive gene from a distant ancestor who was part Naoki. While her condition is known throughout the city of Sae, Kareneth’s capital, it is not known outside of there.”

“Part Naoki?” Kii asked. “What does that mean?”

“The Naoki was an ancient race that died out long before even the Kareneth Empire began,” Kiminobu remembered from his history classes. “They were not exactly human, but they weren’t exactly animals, either.”

“They were... unusual in that they were both,” the Lord Chancellor said. “They were humans with animal features. One of Princess Yumisa’s ancestors fell deeply in love with one of them, they married, they had children. Over the millennia, the gene worked its way out of the Kareneth family line until they thought it was gone forever.”

“And then Yumisa,” Kiminobu said.

“Yes, Your Highness. The doctors believe it will not show again in the family line, but...” He shrugged. “But it is a condition your family will have to accept.”

“The Princess started ZOO, didn’t she?” he asked, and the Lord Chancellor could hear the admiration in the Prince’s voice. “She wanted to see the world, not be trapped at home, and this was the best way for her to do it. No one would suspect a Princess of being part of a rock band.”

“You’re a lot smarter than we were expecting,” the Lord Chancellor said. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Actually, it’s admirable.”

“I’ve listened to Shiori talk about them enough—kind of easy to put two and two together. May I ask who ZOO is?”

“They’re her handmaidens,” the Lord Chancellor said. “And they will protect the Princess with their lives. They love her dearly.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Kiminobu said. “I would hope nothing less. So, assuming I understand everything that’s going on correctly, I got to go backstage the other night so they could check me out and I could see all of them. None of them had taken their stage makeup off because they did not want me to be able to tell the handmaidens from the Princess—so they were protecting her even then. I assume I am to guess which one is the real Princess from among the fakes?”

“Yes, Your Highness—brilliantly deducted.” The Lord Chamberlain bowed to him.

“I don’t care which one she is,” Kiminobu told him. “They were all gorgeous, and I would be lucky to have any of them as my wife. I am afraid whichever one she is, she will be the unlucky one, considering what happened to me.”

“My Lord, they went through a lot of trouble,” the Lord Chamberlain said.

Kiminobu smiled and clapped the Lord Chamberlain on the shoulder. “I have a suspicion, but I could be wrong. I think we have time to play along—don’t we, Captain?” he asked Asa.

“Not with an Uprising command carrier almost upon us,” Asa told him. “But she is your wife, Your Highness. Play her game if you wish.”

“You truly don’t care about her Naoki heritage, Your Highness?” the Lord Chamberlain asked nervously.

“She cannot help how she was born,” Kiminobu said. “Besides, we have to marry. I’m just glad she’s not a three hundred pound ogre covered in warts. I can deal with a Naoki-girl.”

“He loves cat-girls in anime,” Kii said brightly.

Kiminobu glared at her. “That’s our secret!” he hissed at her.

The Lord Chamberlain laughed. “You and the Princess will get along fine—she loves anime, too. Come, we should hurry.”

“I don’t like this, Your Highness,” Asa told him as they walked toward the group of women.

“Asa, you don’t like anything,” he told her. “Chill.”

They approached the group, and the six of them all stepped forward as one. “Greetings, Prince Kiminobu Takahashi,” they all spoke as one. “You know us, but you do not know who we truly are. All but one of us are human, wearing costumes, the other is not. If you wish to know who is your true bride-to-be, you must decide for yourself which is the real Princess Yumisa Hase. If you do not wish to do this, we will leave, and the war will continue, unfortunately. Now, we will reveal ourselves to you.”

Again as one, they removed their head coverings. The first girl walked forward and bowed deeply to the Prince. She was dressed in a pure white kimono with a pink ribbon around her waist tied in a giant bow against her back. She had a cute button nose, and her face was painted pure white with three long whiskers extending from each side of her nose. Her white hair was piled on her head with two long, pink pins stuck through the loose bun. But what made Kiminobu smile was the two, long rabbit ears protruding from her white hair.

“Your Highness, I am Usagi. I hope I please you.”

She stepped back and to the side to let the next girl approach.

The Lord Chamberlain motioned the next girl forward. She was dressed in an orange and black kimono, and her face was painted to look like that of a tiger with a black nose. She looked fierce but sweet at the same time. Tiger ears protruded from her orange hair. She had pretty green eyes.

“I am Tora, Your Highness,” she said. “I hope I please you.”

She took a step back and stood next to Usagi.

Asa leaned into the Prince’s ear and said, “This is taking too long.”

He held up a finger to hold her statement as the next girl approached. She wore a grey kimono that had a leafy pattern on it. Her face was painted grey to match the kimono. Koala bear ears were in her hair.

“I am Koara, Your Highness,” she said. “I hope I please you.”

She stepped back next to Tora.

“What is wrong with her?” Kiminobu asked, seeing how the next girl in line’s ears were twitching. He approached her, seeing the obvious pain on her face and in her eyes. He put his arms around her and pulled her close against his body. “It’s you,” he said, remembering the girl he had spoken to, the manager who had gone to get food for Kitsune. “I knew it was going to be you. What’s wrong, Yumisa?”

“H-How did you know?” she asked him, her voice strained by tears—either of joy or pain she did not know.

“Faith,” he said, stroking her hair. “And a belief that maybe the world would give me someone as beautiful as I found you to be.” He lifted her face to look at him and wiped away her tears, careful not to destroy her makeup in the process. “Now, what is wrong with you? Are you hurting?”

“The Princess has very sensitive hearing,” Chiharu told him, coming forward. “It is part of her wolf nature. Something has been bothering her since we neared Vadora, and it’s grown worse inside the shield.”

“When did it start?” he asked, looking at the other girl.

“A while ago,” Chiharu told him. “An hour maybe?”

“She can’t be hearing *The Kingfisher*,” Asa said in a startled tone.

“No animals in the area are being affected,” Kiminobu said, looking at two nearby deer who were grazing peacefully.

“What is going on?” Chiharu asked.

“Our mech, *The Kingfisher*, is a bit troublesome,” he told them. “It hasn’t had a pilot since my father lost his arm, and whenever we attempt maintenance on it, it... screams. But usually only the people inside the city can hear it. The sound never travels this far from the castle!” Kiminobu looked at Asa. “Contact the castle—see if the maintenance is finished.”

“Yes, my lord! Castle, this—”

A high-pitched screech came through the comms, sending Yumisa to her knees, covering her ears. She wailed almost as loudly, and Asa closed communications.

“Sorry, Your Highness!” she told the Princess, who was collapsed against Kiminobu’s body.

“Make it stop!” Yumisa cried as she curled up into a ball, holding her ears.

Everyone looked up when the sky above them began to darken, and they saw an Unbound Uprising command carrier begin to rain fire down upon the Vadoran shield.

“That’s not good,” Kii said, shielding her eyes so she could see better.

“That’s a new command carrier, and the way that laser fire is hitting the shield... it’s not going to last long,” Rumiko reported.

“That shield has never fallen,” Kiminobu told her.

A crack appeared in the shield.

“New technology,” Rumiko told him. “Gotta love science.”

“What do we do?” the Lord Chancellor asked in panic.

Just then, hundreds of troops launched from the outside of the Wall toward the command carrier to try and destroy it. But the command carrier also launched troops of its own.

“Everyone, to your mechs!” Asa commanded the Royal Guard. “Your Highness, it might be highly uncomfortable for your bride, but you need to get her back to the castle!”

“I’ll... be okay,” Yumisa told Kiminobu faintly.

“No, the sound will get worse the closer we get,” Kiminobu told her. “I won’t put you through that.”

Yumisa smiled up at him. “That’s so sweet.” She groaned and leaned into him. “You don’t... seem as fat,” she suddenly noticed.

“I’m not wearing as many clothes as I was the other night,” he told her.

“We can worry about that later!” the fox said, helping Yumisa to her feet. “I’m Chiharu, Your Highness. Does that troop carrier have a room where we can take the Princess and plug in some headphones?”

“Headphones! We have noise-cancelling headphones programmed specifically against *The Kingfisher!*” he told her. “They should help Yumisa!”

“Great! We’ll take care of her!”

“You’ll take care of them both,” Asa told her as a new variety of Uprising mobile suits began adding their firepower to the assault on the shield. “When those mechs get in, we’re going to be needed here.” She grabbed Chiharu’s dress and shook the handmaiden hard. “If anything happens to my Prince, I’m holding you personally responsible—do you understand me?”

“As far as I’m concerned, he’s my Prince now, too,” Chiharu told her. “We’ll take care of them both! We’re all fighters!”

Asa looked her over and nodded. “Fine. Get them to safety!”

Kiminobu held Yumisa close and put his arms around her. As they ran toward the carrier, he watched his guard race for their mechs. Then something swatted the back of his legs, throwing him off balance, and he crashed to the ground.

“Kiminobu!” Yumisa cried, kneeling next to him.

“What hit me?” he asked, looking around. And it was then he saw Yumisa’s wolf tail for the first time. He stared at it for a second and then looked at her.

Yumisa saw the look and turned around. “Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention that I have a tail,” she said. “Oops. I promise, a wolf tail and ears are my only wolfish features,” she told Kiminobu. “Oh, and my gold eyes.” Then she touched her teeth with her tongue. “Possibly slightly larger canines, too, but I swear that’s everything! Every other part is completely human!”

“You’re perfect,” he told her. “Beyond perfect.”

Yumisa smiled and then kissed him. She didn’t know why she suddenly wanted to, but it was the best feeling in the world to her. When he returned the kiss a moment later, her heart leapt.

“Run now, smooch later!” Chiharu told them, pulling them both to their feet and pushing them toward the carrier.

“So much for the wedding!” Yumisa laughed.

“We can do it on the carrier,” Kiminobu told her. “Or just wait until we get back to the castle.”

“It would be nice to have your parents there,” she said. “It would be nice to have mine there, too.”

“The treaty is important,” the Lord Chancellor reminded her as he ran beside them. “I’ll marry you on the carrier.”

“Perfect,” Yumisa said.

Behind them, the shield broke, and Uprising mobile suits began to pour through the breach. The Nexus Suits and Wall mobile suit poured in after them and began fighting.

“Ugh!” Yumisa cried, falling to her knees again and grabbing her ears. “That noise... it’s getting louder!”

“Louder?” Kiminobu asked, looking into her gold eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Wall Command to Prince Kiminobu,” a voice called over the communications. “We just got a report that *The Kingfisher* has left the castle and is coming this way.”

“*The Kingfisher*?” Kiminobu looked at the Lord Chancellor. “My father can’t pilot it anymore—not since he lost his arm.” He touched the earpiece. “Wall Command, are you sure?”

“The castle just said it shot out of the hangar bay like a bat out of hell, Your Highness—tore a hole in the roof as it did so!”

“Who’s piloting it?” he asked.

There was a pause.

“Who’s piloting it?” Kiminobu demanded.

“No one,” the Wall told him.